

Various and Sundry Reflections

This document is a collection of random notes and observations about a number of things which can tie in with the overall theme of the Lectio Divina Homepage. It follows roughly the progression of the liturgical year beginning with the first Sunday of Advent of the year 2017. It will be updated on a regular basis.

Please note: this document is placed under "Essays related to the early Church." Reason? Not that it does but because there's simply more room in this category.

There's a genuine thrill about first vespers of Advent, that is, Saturday evening. It's more meaningful than New Year's Eve, just another flip of the calendar. Advent signals more than this, the coming of Jesus Christ, and for this reason many people consider it as the best time of year, more so than Christmas which it heralds. This year (2017) we're cheated in that the Fourth Sunday of Advent begins on Christmas Eve, making just a bit over three weeks of the season. Anyway, when Christmas does come there's a let-down. Part of the reason seems to be that everyone can identify with waiting in one form or another. Another factor is that we've just come off the month of November which is associated with commemoration of the dead. We're all going to end up there, so awareness of this...our waiting for death...contributes to the waiting of Advent, by no means morbid but actually exciting. Then Christmas arrives, and it's all over.

The theme of coming coupled with the end of the calendar years brings up a keener sense of time's passage, especially when you're older. Death is more real than it had been as well as awareness that you have fewer years in front of you than behind you. Also the perception of time is different, passing by more rapidly. This is a common theme, but when it hits you, definitely it's personal! You look at younger people, knowing what they're going through and what's in store for them before they reach your age. One friend asked would I exchange their troubles for the aches and pains I'm experiencing now in my older age? The choice was easy as well for him, a resounding "no." Their pains are psychological whereas for us they're physical. Even if the physical pains are troublesome and are bound to increase, still the answer is "no." Actually you almost feel like gloating over this, being free now from so much anxiety.

Climamen: a Latin noun meaning an inclination or turning aside favored by the poet Lucretius in his **On the Nature of Thing**. It forms the title of Stephen Greenblatt's book **The Swerve** where he defines *climamen* as "an unexpected, unpredictable movement of matter...a swerve or unforeseen deviation from the direct trajectory—in this case, toward oblivion" (p. 7). Greenblatt tells the story of a Renaissance book hunter who comes across Lucretius' long-lost poem in a German monastery which influenced a whole slew of writers who, over the centuries, used this poem as a basis for scientific speculation. The end? That the poem served to undermine much of Christian theology and therefore the foundation upon which the Church was built. Interesting stuff indeed but in long run, pretty immature. That is to say, you get a sense of glee at overturning a long-established institution which, admittedly, was ripe for it. Once that glee has subsided as it has today, we're left with pretty much nothing. However, it heralds a renewal of spiritual insight freed

from the futile attempt to dovetail science with religion. Thus the way is open for spirituality to go on its own unhindered from constraints of the past.

There are a number of images in the Bible that stick with us, some well known and others less familiar. One of the latter comes from Jer 36.22: "It was the ninth month, and the king was sitting in the winter house and there was a fire burning in the brazier before him." The king is Jehoiakim and the scroll is from Jeremiah. This image somehow is reminiscent of a play of Shakespeare...Hamlet perhaps...with the king sitting in semi-darkness within a barely heated room, brooding as he cuts off pieces of the scroll and tosses them into the fire. No one dare question him. All the attendants could do was to stand there, keep quiet and watch Jeremiah's scroll go up in flames little by little.

In the weeks before Christmas there's a sore temptation, pretty constant, to buy something...anything...especially online. That's how insidious is the effect of advertising. Being aware of this fairly constantly requires more effort than meets the eye. Everyone's doing it. Then there are the bargains...However, resisting the temptation to find a bargain has a reward that outstrips any gift. Might have something to do with the virtue of fortitude. This gift you've given to yourself has a broader reach provided you don't give in. Actually thinking in terms of "giving in" isn't exactly accurate. It's more a building up of your own character enabling you to better discern temptations of a more serious nature and to resist them.

Winter sunlight, to be sure, illumines things we'd never appreciate. It does so by coming at objects from the side, almost parallel to the ground, instead of from above. Not only that, by reason of this angle the light itself has a much yellower hue. Also you feel tempted to walk right into the light, not ascend to it, as at other times of the year. I.e., the light has become more accessible, a neat way of view it since so much of a given day consists of darkness. Somewhere in his **Journal** Thoreau speaks of this particular sunlight hitting windows, giving the impression that the houses are ablaze.

Some time before it snows, even some twelve hours or so beforehand, everything quiets down with not even the slightest breeze. All sounds, including distant traffic, are muffled giving the sense that something is coming which you can almost taste. This perhaps is one the best times to take a walk, even to step outdoors for a while to absorb the silence which is like a weight but one that isn't burdensome. As for a snow storm, one of the nicest things about it is the day after. People are out and about shoveling, making for a certain neighborhood camaraderie that's pretty much absent nowadays.

When it's really cold and windy, the atmosphere turns a steel gray lasting all day. Jets passing overhead give a definite cracking sound, almost as if cutting through ice. As for general wildlife, the most you're bound to see are the ubiquitous squirrels (gray and the more pesky brown ones), blue jays and what livens up this atmosphere, the ever cheerful chickadees. It's quite something to have a jay and chickadee going at the same time...a study in contrasts! As for plants, rhododendrons curl up, standing there like soldiers at attention fairly immune to the wind.

From what a friend said, Advent this year (2017) is the shortest since 1977, the Fourth Sunday being literally one day, Christmas Eve day! As for Advent, everyone says it's their favorite season. Something about the liturgy and the songs involved, all about waiting. That means everyone can tie into waiting one way or another. So if we expand on this, virtually all spirituality can be put as such. Some may wait in this way while others in another. In other words, waiting is the binding force that unites humanity. This can be proved as far as Christians go when Christmas arrives. Once it does, there's a distinct let-down, for many experience the holiday as a tinged with some pain or another. Then for most there's the hollow celebration of New Year's Day which doesn't hold a candle against the First Sunday of Advent, the Church's New Year's Day.

December 21, winter solstice, is one of the most special days of the year. Truly it is a solstice...a standing still of the sun...more as a pause when descending days are suspended momentarily. Then they start a swing upward all the way to June 21, the exact opposite. Today it's fun to look where the sun is shining in familiar places, take a mental snapshot of them and compare with June 21. Then you can do this in reverse or from June 21 onward.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day have a certain ambiguity about them or better, the whole season. It's well documented and familiar to everyone, usually tinged with a certain sadness and thus very difficult for persons who find themselves alone. This sentiment extends throughout the week or until New Year's Day which is one of the most artificial holidays on the calendar. Then the Christmas depression carries over into January which can be difficult due to the cold, etc. Escaping this is virtually impossible nor are there any easy solutions. The best, it seems, is not so much to accept it but to observe the season in all its details without passing judgment yea or nay. Actually the value of this season is appreciated later in the year...as we approach Lent, for example. We can look back on Christmas and see how it evokes just about the biggest bugaboo that affects us all, our innate loneliness. Neither does Lent which is next on the menu nor Easter evoke this loneliness, so it comes at a good time not terribly long after Christmas.

When the weather is really cold and windy you rush from place to place outside in as straight a line as possible. The same applies when it's really hot. The more you consider the two opposites, the more they have in common. Another feature of very cold weather, especially when there's no wind, is the crisp, crunchy sound of footsteps: very difficult for a person to sneak up on you. Also the sound of a vehicle is especially loud but not irritating as the tires have that peculiar squealing sound. In days of old cold weather and storms were taken for granted but with the usual precautions. Nowadays the media loves to frighten us with dire warnings which is indicative of our tendency to exaggerate. It's amplified with new technological devices which can pinpoint differences in weather, etc. When taken to an extreme like this, it becomes simply laughable.

There's a certain dread that comes over many people after New Year's Day...continued cold weather, the threat of more snow, darkness though even now daylight is increasing, lack of holidays on the horizon and even worse, credit payments for Christmas gifts. So with this in mind, on the second of January we take our first steps gingerly.

You don't have to pay attention to weather forecasts to tell if a large snowstorm is on the horizon. No "app" is required, to use perhaps the most pesky term floating about nowadays. There's something about the day before...calm in a way that's like no other though it's quite subtle and clouding up about twelve hours beforehand.

It's rather interesting to read the great care that went into construction of the ark of the Lord as in Exodus, Deuteronomy and First Kings. Such details may be applied to the coming of God in Christ, the one who fulfills these details. So if you follow the descriptions of the ark just noted, you get a pretty good way to view the details surrounding Jesus' birth even though they happen to be considerably less.

Epiphany marks the end of the Christmas season. A friend enlightened me about how long it lasts, I having thought Candlemas was it. He said that while Epiphany marks the completion of the Christmas *season*, Candlemas (2 February) marks the end of the Christmas *cycle*. Don't know if he's right but seems spot on.

In some ways the bitter cold is exciting. Chief among them is that it confines you to smaller, warm places not by choice but by necessity. To be in one is a delight, really, looking out at the sub-zero weather knowing that it's quite deadly and that a relatively thin wall separates you from freezing to death. In a situation like this, the threat of power going out is not an inconvenience but a matter of life and death. However, this gives rise to a certain freedom knowing that it's okay if you don't make it. All will be well. Can't explain this sentiment, but it's true.

There's a special category of almost always men you might label as "shop men" or those engaged in a trade. They're characterized as down-to-earth, lovers of family, country and God: in sum no nonsense and exceptionally reliable. They stand out among the crowd, one reason being the drastic reduction in the fields in which they work, superseded by tech oriented folks. When dealing with them, you're on solid ground even though their scope of interests may be limited of which they are blissfully unaware.

The distinction between to speak and to talk is almost abolished completely, and this doesn't mean dictionary-wise but in common speech. Nowadays we talk to someone which means engaging in a one-way conversation or better, no conversation but a monologue. To speak with a person (not to a person) is virtually absent, this implying a real conversation, emphasis being upon the with-ness, not the to-ness as with talking.

Selah: a word found in the Psalms meaning a pause and seems to have a liturgical function such as to pause here and there while singing a particular psalm. A treatise by Gregory of Nyssa also on this home page has a treatise **On the Inscriptions of the Psalms** where he speaks of the mystical sense of *selah*. It's a good word to examine more thoroughly...perhaps an article...because it can be used to show what happens after you've engaged in some *lectio divina*. that is to say, after you've read something and are compelled to put the text down and simply rest in God. After a while (the time depends upon each person and circumstance) you pick up the text again and repeat the

process. Because the *selah* intervenes on its own accord, independent of our wishes, we don't have any real say in how it proceeds but simply go along for the ride, and what a wonderful ride it is.

A recent heavy rainstorm with temps getting to around 62 melted away the considerable snow received less than a week ago. In fact, the same day last week the high temp was somewhere around zero degrees. The snow was followed by the usual clean-up, even some heavy-duty machines for its removal. Then in such a short time every trace of that work vanished. Literally.

Ordinary time after Christmas is rather awkward. Reason: we've come through a long stretch of it from after last Pentecost lasting until the beginning of Advent. Now we're in a kind of abeyance awaiting the beginning of Lent which is more than a call to repentance and preparation for Easter but a renewal of our appreciation of sacred time as well as sacred space.

About six inches of snow fell the other day, "Normal Rockwell" snow as someone called it...light, fluffy and clinging to all the trees. Several days later a whole mess of rain which washed it away followed by several inches of more snow. This alteration between all white and all dun (the overall color of nature in winter) is truly amazing, a feast for the eyes.

There's something both fascinating and disturbing about gray squirrels (i.e., rats with furry tails)...fascinating in that they perform quite remarkable acrobats in and among the trees. Disturbing in that their quick, nervous motions can get to you after observing them for a while.

Recently a sizable snowstorm happened. As often the case, the day and hours before are especially quiet, giving a hint that something is about to happen. However, you have to be tuned into this. When the snow does begin or when it falls on more or less bare ground (the previous snow had pretty much melted away), it's surprising how loud the sound. The flakes have no cushion on which to land and make quite a noise they make until some accumulates. Then almost at once everything falls silent, but an active silence compared with the more passive silence prior to the storm.

The movement from winter into spring becomes more perceptible from mid February on, that is, larger swaths of light in the evening though not so much in the morning, at least practically speaking.

Most people will agree that Holy Week is the most wonderful of the Church's entire liturgical year. During that time as well as a week or two beforehand the Church brings out her big guns...an assembly of the richest biblical readings one can wish for. In many ways the anonymous sermon read on Holy Saturday about Christ's descent to the underworld is the highlight. Rather, it sets the tone for the readings during the Easter Vigil.

Then the day after Easter (the octave is a full-throttled replication of Easter Sunday) everything comes to a grinding halt, if you will. The liturgy is peppered with readings from the Acts of the Apostles which extends throughout much of the fifty day period of Easter Time. In sum, after the richness preceding Easter comes what can be put as a certain period of dryness, almost sterile-

like. What's offered is basically prosaic and pushing it further, uninspiring. This begs the question, what do we do once we are resurrected? Do we simply hang around? Sin, pain and all that's associated with daily life come to an end. It's an interesting question to ponder, for it reveals our state of mind that existed prior to Easter and how it needs considerable readjustment for the time afterwards.

Another way of looking at this peculiar situation is to consider religion in general or worldwide. All of it had developed in an environment when the human lifespan was, say, around thirty years, not much more than that with exceptions, of course. Religion is designed to impart meaning to a person growing up and coming into maturity as it prepares you for death and what follows. Now that we're living well beyond thirty (tripling that in so many instances), how do you integrate the principles of religion during that longer time frame? And so the post-Easter letdown might have some bearing on this problem. Still it's fairly new in human history. Religion has had a long time to develop and inculcate adherents to its principles as they are passed on from one generation to the next, all pretty much within the thirty year lifespan. Some serious thought and research is needed to address this issue, for the principles of religion which had extended throughout the roughly thirty year framework require adjustment if they are to be meaningful. Indeed, a problem many people are aware of, yet it remains below the surface, in the unconscious, if you will.

When early May comes there's a noticeable difference in the budding of trees, shrubs, etc of higher elevations compared with lower ones. This doesn't involve much distance but is typical of hills and valleys of New England. Makes for an interesting contrast. Soon the budding will be more intense making this time of the year rival autumn in its colors. The major difference, of course, is that spring colors are pastel...Monet-like. Several weeks later the greening intensifies until everything turns not so much a monotonous green but one that's inescapable.

As May advances and therefore spring, there's a certain nostalgia for the winter which we've left not that far behind. Nostalgia in that apart from the inconvenient of various weather related problems, it was marked by a definite quiet and solitude. Now everything has come alive with more noise both human and machine. It's precisely this type of noise that makes us long for what winter offers. Also advancement into the spring and thus summer is rather awkward as we retain some elements of this benefit of winter in our minds.

In the autumn when leaves are falling off trees, you can track them indoors. Not a problem, really, but can be when they're wet and muddy. Now with spring underway, trees drop these little whirl-y-gigs by the millions causing the same problem. A friend of mine was complaining about this which made me think how lucky we are to have such a problem. As for spring, what we see now in a few short months will be decaying. The process of birth-to-life-to-death happens without ceasing, mindlessly, if you will, making you pause and wonder what really is going on. Does it fulfill some grand design or just goes on for X number of years (centuries) before being overtaken by another natural process? You can get some answers by turning to science, but that has little impact when you're out in the field marveling at what's transpiring, has been transpiring and will be transpiring, you by chance being inserted somewhere in this chain of events.

Toward evening or some fifteen minutes after sunset local birds make their way to trees and shrubs to settle down for the night. Often they can cause quite a lot of noise, perhaps reviewing the day's events before going to sleep. Similarly in the pre-dawn twilight one bird, usually a robin, is the first to make a single, sharp tweet or whatever you call it. A few minutes later another chimes in and before you know, it's quite a racket which goes on for a while then fades away to the usual daily chirping.

Spring and summer evenings are lovely, of course, but there's something melancholic about them compared with those of autumn and winter. They leave an impression that you'd almost want to be somewhere else, an elusive sight here and there suggestive of that otherness. The more you attempt to pin down where this might be, it escapes your fingers. On the other hand, the cold and clarity of the other two seasons don't allow for sentimentality. While they too are suggestive of something other which you perceive but don't understand, they do it with a more inviting atmosphere instead of leaving you hanging where you are as with spring and summer.